DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 266 EF 005 717

AUTHOR Meyer, Kirk
TITLE The Boston Schoolyard Initiative: An American City's Approach to Sustainable Schoolyard Development.
INSTITUTION Department for Education and Employment, London (England).
PUB DATE 1997-09-21
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Learning through Landscapes: Grounds for Celebration Conference (September 21-24, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Planning; *Educational Facilities Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Program Development; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Boston Public Schools MA; Massachusetts (Boston); *School Yards

ABSTRACT

This presentation describes the development process behind the Boston Schoolyard Initiative: a 5-year, inner city, community-driven initiative to transform neglected and unwelcome schoolyards into active centers of school and community use. Each phase of the initiative is discussed from community organizing through design, construction, and ongoing maintenance. The initiative shows sustainable schoolyard programs need total involvement from all potential users in the design and development phases, a focus on the multi-use approach, the integration of the school grounds into the life of the school, and inclusion of the school yard in future budgeting allocations. (GR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative: an American city's approach to sustainable schoolyard development

Kirk Meyer - USA
Director Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative

ED 443 266

EF 005 717

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✗ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kirk Meyer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Learning through LANDSCAPES Grounds for Celebration 21-24 September 1997 OECD OCDE D/EE

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative

An American City's Approach to Sustainable Schoolyard Development

Kirk Meyer

First of all, I'd like to thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me to say a few words. I bring you greetings from your friends and colleagues in the United States. As we consider national models for the development and use of school grounds, the United States is conspicuous in that we have no national program in place. To those of us working in the field, it is astonishing that the schoolyard is not always considered an asset of great value to the educational process. We've seen the extraordinary and irrefutable results of utilising school grounds in the happy faces, curious minds, and exercised bodies of students engaged in outdoor hands-on learning. This is especially noticeable in an urban setting, such as the City of Boston, where unsupervised children are often not allowed outside for safety and security reasons. The simple childhood act of playing and learning outdoors should be the right of children everywhere and should be a priority for those of us involved in public education and child welfare issues.

The U.S. is a very large place, and despite the fact that we all watch the same television shows for six or seven hours a day, there are still regional differences based upon climate, topography, cultural diversity and outlook toward the educational process. What we have seen thus far, in terms of schoolyard development, are locally inspired projects, organised by concerned parents and educators, and typically in consort with community-based environmental organisations. These programs tend to focus on creating schoolyard wildlife habitats, natural areas and gardens, and in the main, emphasise science as an academic discipline. This approach is an easy one to understand since environmental educators have long used experiential learning as a teaching methodology and have been very successful in doing so. In Boston, we are taking a more broad-based approach by encouraging the design of multi-use spaces that lend themselves to instruction in all subjects and also meet the social and recreational needs of youth and the community-at-large. As Learning Through Landscapes has so ably shown, both in practice and in their many excellent publications, school grounds can play a vital role, across curricula, if properly integrated into a school's ongoing mission.

As these schoolyard projects arise in the U.S., in relative isolation from each other, we are seeing the co-evolution of organically grown models that reflect local concerns and tastes. This is probably a good thing in that the process and hard work involved in bringing a project to fruition builds character, commitment, and a strong sense of ownership. At the same time, we are undoubtedly re-inventing the proverbial wheel over and over again. As a result of these pockets of interest around the country, a loose network of support has arisen via conferences, internet web sites, and communication between colleagues. Our experience in Boston will speak to issues that concern Detroit, Chicago, New York or Los Angeles. Maybe even London, Paris, or Stockholm. Given our collective experiences in schoolyard development, it makes sense to consider how we can offer technical assistance to those with a budding interest in the field. With access to curricular resources, case histories, and models of administrative implementation, newcomers will begin at a higher level of sophistication than is currently available. I would be quick to caution, however, that in terms of the design and sustainability of specific sites, local control should be the rule. Information is needed. Bureaucracy is not.

Let me describe what we are doing in Boston, Massachusetts. Boston is an old and historic city, at least by our "new world" standards, that sits on the Atlantic seacoast of the United States. It has the country's oldest system of public parks as well as the nation's oldest public school system. Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed Central Park in New York City, designed his famous

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Emerald Necklace for Boston, a ring of urban parks that still help beautify and define the city. Unfortunately, public schoolyards, which comprise 250 acres of urban open space, have not fared so well. Most of them have been paved over and forgotten. These barren wastelands of asphalt and compacted dirt send a negative message to students about the importance we attach to their educational experience.

A former Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools told me a story, about the first day of school, one year, when she was greeting incoming pupils at a local elementary school. She described a little girl who emerged from her parents' car, took a prolonged look at the school and its grounds, then promptly began to cry and jumped back into the car. This should not happen. These special places of learning should not strike fear into the hearts of those we are trying to inspire. They should be welcoming, user-friendly spaces that send a positive message to all who enter.

There are 120 public schools in Boston. Demographically, eighty per cent of the 65,000 students represent racial minorities (non-white). It is common for notices sent home with students to be translated into twelve languages ranging from Cambodian to Chinese to Portuguese and Spanish. The United States has been called a great "melting pot" of cultures but I prefer to think of it as a tossed salad where ingredients are combined but retain their distinctive flavours. In the same way that a diverse gene pool makes for healthy organisms, cultural diversity fosters a society that benefits from wide-ranging tradition and thought. When I look at a class of young Boston schoolchildren I see the future of our planet. If only the United Nations could play & work together with such ease.

Of course, young children grow older and must deal with the social, economic and environmental realities of living in a crowded 20th century city. Most families with children in the schools have incomes that fall below federal poverty guidelines. By the time students reach high school, increased dropout rates, low test scores, and an atmosphere of apathy, and sometimes violence, plague the system. The public perception of the schools is that of an inner city system in decline. Of course, working within the schools, as I often do, one can see the truly noble efforts made by many teachers and students who are struggling to teach and learn. We hope that the Boston Schoolyard Initiative, which is an innovative, highly visible program and is likely to be noticed even by those who have no children in the schools, will help foster general support for public education in Boston. One member of a local schoolyard group has referred to the Initiative as an example of community-driven education reform and to the degree that we are successful in empowering residents to work with the schools I would concur with this assessment.

In the late nineteen eighties and early nineties, with the aid of a small grant program, funded by the Boston Foundation and administered by the Boston Green Space Alliance, a number of schools began planting trees and shrubs in an effort to introduce a bit of the natural world into the students' otherwise built environment. A few parents' groups were fundraising to install play structures to provide their children with some form of outdoor activity. Some of these projects were successful but most took years to complete and, as you might imagine, it took a lot of bake sales to fund a $40,000 play structure. Concurrent with these efforts, a group named the Urban Land Use Task Force, also underwritten by local foundations, was meeting to discuss broad strategies for the development of urban parcels of land. Much to everyone's surprise, including my own, schoolyard revitalisation had a vocal grassroots constituency, and this issue, important to the residents of Boston if not to the policy makers, rose to the top of the agenda.

In the fall of 1994, representatives from the Urban Land Use Task Force met with Thomas M. Menino, Mayor of the City of Boston. Schoolyards are public facilities, we explained, and despite community efforts to improve them the job was not getting done. Surely, the City should

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

shoulder some responsibility in making the most of its public school grounds. Without flinching, the Mayor agreed to set-up a task force to explore the issue. Over the next six months, a broad-based group of interested individuals and organisations met to develop an approach to schoolyard revitalisation. In the spring of 1995, the Schoolyard Task Force forwarded its unanimous recommendations to the Mayor who enthusiastically embraced them. By the autumn of 1995, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative was born.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative is a five year public/private partnership, between the City of Boston and a group of local foundations working together as the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative. Its aim is to transform neglected and unwelcoming schoolyards into active centres of school and community use. The approach highlights school/community participation in the design & development process and weaves together citizen empowerment, sustainable community development, outdoor education, and environmental stewardship of urban open spaces.

What may distinguish our initiative, from some of the other presentations at this conference, is our heavy emphasis on involving neighbourhood residents and non-school local youth programs in the development process. Urban open space is a limited commodity that must often serve multiple populations and must also survive its share of vandalism and misuse. In order to serve the needs of the community-at-large, to encourage year round usage, and to help sustain capital improvements, we have tried to include any party that is a potential user of the space, or will be impacted by its development. This includes parents, students, educators, administrators, custodians, before and after school programs, summer camps, local merchants & business partners, crime watch groups, senior citizens groups, community-based organisations and neighbourhood residents, including the abutter who doesn't want a basketball hoop under his/her bedroom window. This inclusive model has fostered a sense of ownership that extends beyond the schoolyard gate and has made projects a source of both school and community pride.

In a nutshell, the Initiative is a process defined by four phases:

Phase I/Community Organising

This first phase involves building a local constituency capable of assessing community needs, developing a consensus on the design of capital improvements and giving input with regard to ongoing programming & maintenance. Privately funded Organising & Planning Grants are awarded to schoolyard groups to underwrite the process of bringing on an organiser and convening a series of community meetings.

Most private foundations will not fund capital improvements of public facilities. "That's what we pay taxes for.", is a common response when asked to do so. There are, of course, exceptions, and we do have donors willing to pay for specific capital pieces such as a play structure or the installation of plant materials. A number of local foundations have been willing, however, to underwrite the process component of the Initiative. By pooling their donations into the privately held Fund for Boston Schoolyards, we have been able to issue a single Request For Proposals to schools. Schools awarded grants (average/$10,000) are encouraged to hire a part time professional community organiser and to ally themselves with a local community development corporation (CDC), a non-profit group dedicated to neighbourhood development. In this way, the school will benefit from the resources of the CDC and the CDC will be encouraged to include

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

schoolyard development on its own list of priorities. As the schoolyard becomes common ground between the school and the neighbourhood, we hope to see relationships formed that will further strengthen this important bond.

Phase II/Designing Improvements

When a schoolyard group has been formed that reflects the school's interests as well as those of the community-at-large, and has met to discuss general issues and concerns, they are assigned a Project Manager from the Boston Public Facilities Department and a landscape architect contracted by the City. The landscape architect works with the group to translate their vision into construction documents. This is typically done through a series of schematics based upon ideas generated by the group and gradually modified as a consensus is forged. Although capital funding may not allow for the construction of all improvements, schoolyard groups are able to draft an entire Master Plan that can serve as the basis for future renovations. The Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative staff provides technical assistance based upon "best practices" gleaned from successful schoolyard projects in Boston and abroad. As local projects are completed they will serve as models for subsequent projects.

Phase III/Construction

Construction documents, approved by the schoolyard group, the Public Facilities Dept., and the School Dept., are put out to bid as required by state law. The schoolyard group will have prioritised the Master Plan and will construct improvements based upon a combination of public and private funds. Citizen participation through Community Build Days is strongly encouraged as a way to save money and to foster a sense of local ownership.

Phase IV/Ongoing Maintenance & Programming

If the process has been successful to this point, there will exist a "Friends of the Schoolyard" group with the interest, knowledge, and capacity to help maintain capital improvements & to assist in implementing ongoing programs. In fact, a maintenance protocol has recently been developed jointly by the BPS Office of Facilities Management and a group of local schoolyard organisers that will serve as a model for the Initiative. This cost conscious but effective approach involves a circuit-riding crew of three maintenance personnel, a van, and some equipment. This crew will be devoted only to schoolyards and will spend their year, in open communication and partnership with the local schoolyard group, performing ongoing maintenance. Their priorities will include the safety inspection and repair of play structures and specialised care of plant materials. These are functions that the local custodial crew is not trained to do and in which the circuit-riders will receive skills training from the Boston Parks Department. The Friends of the Schoolyard will

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

create their own maintenance schedule in terms of seasonal clean-ups, bulb-planting, and other activities that lend themselves to local volunteers.

A Schoolyard Pedagogy

School teachers, students, community-based educators and neighbourhood youth programs that have been part of the development process become stakeholders with an interest in utilising the new schoolyard for a variety of activities. In fact, involvement in the design phase has encouraged educators to be proactive in constructing improvements that will make lesson activities easy to conduct. The establishment of clearly defined areas, the routing of pedestrian traffic, the separation of active and passive gathering spots, the creation of stages, amphitheatres, natural areas or gardens will provide an infrastructure that will encourage multiple opportunities for creative play and academic learning.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative has formed a loosely-knit consortium of educational institutions that are interested in outdoor experiential learning. For the purposes of this forum, let me briefly list a few of these organisations that focus on environmental education:

•The Massachusetts Audubon Society has two full time naturalists working with the Boston schools. These dedicated environmentalists have literally taught city kids about nature using tufts of plant life that have broken through cracks in the asphalted hardscape. Imagine their delight in helping schools design nature areas that will be an ongoing resource.

•Earthworks is a local volunteer organisation that promotes the planting of edible landscapes in the city. They have worked with students and teachers to plant fruit & nut trees and berry bushes. Rather than simply studying plant life from a textbook students are able to plant trees and shrubs, observe them on a daily basis, and give them ongoing care to insure their survival.

•The Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University has created a curriculum, with funding from the National Science Foundation, called Landscape Explorers, which leads 4th and 5th grade students through series of schoolyard activities aimed at instilling a sense of curiosity about, and responsibility for, the landscapes around them.

•The Massachusetts Departments of Environmental Protection and Fisheries & Wildlife offer Project Learning Tree and Project Wild, both of which include some urban-based exercises on plant and animal life.

•The Boston Recycling Office offers professional development workshops on schoolyard composting. Participating schools each receive a free composting bin for use on school grounds.

•One hundred years ago, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society gave awards for the best school garden in Boston. This year that tradition was revived with the prize going to an elementary school involved in the Boston Schoolyard Initiative.

We are working with the aforementioned organisations, and others, to create an outdoor learning "strand" within the BPS Centre for Leadership Development which is the School Department's official vehicle for teacher training. In this way, we hope to institutionalise hands-on learning as a teaching methodology.

Discussions are currently ongoing with the University of Massachusetts' Chancellor's Office and the Graduate School of Education to offer course work to student teachers so they can enter the public schools with a degree of expertise not available to their predecessors. In school, teachers are the connection between students and the world at large and our long term goals can only be met if we invest in educating the educators.

In Boston, there is a movement toward school-based management which gives each school a higher degree of autonomy in planning the delivery of their curriculum. This new flexibility will allow individual sites to extend and combine study periods, encourage teachers to plan interdisciplinary projects, and will loosen the tight schedules that can impede the movement of students to and from outdoor learning areas. Invariably, when teachers are allowed to experiment with taking their classes outdoors, they begin to find a comfort level that comes with familiarity. The students, of course, love it from the start.

The fact that learning may take place outdoors does not, however, exempt schools from the need to quantify the learning experience. The Boston public schools have issued a new set of Curriculum Frameworks and we are already seeing teachers apply these standards to their outdoor activities. For example, a garden journal may satisfy certain writing objectives. Mapping and measuring the schoolyard, counting seeds or identifying shapes are an equivalent alternative to learning math by text only. Science standards such as observation and classification can be conducted with the aid of nature areas, bird feeders or weather stations. As we work to develop a schoolyard pedagogy, we must be sure to relate activities directly to these official evaluation requirements. By formalising the academic viability of the outdoor classroom, we will take a giant step toward eliminating the physical and programmatic boundaries between the school building and its grounds.

In summary, let me restate a few key elements necessary for sustainable schoolyard development:

1) Involve the schoolyard users in every aspect of its design and development. A constituency group with a sense of ownership will help maintain capital improvements and sustain year round programming.

2) Focus on multi-use areas to maximise the potential of this important open space. There is no reason to have fifty kids waiting to go down the slide when there are also greenspaces to

explore, stages to perform on, quiet areas for reading or drawing, and tables and benches for eating or socialising.

3) Integrate the school grounds into the life of the school. Structure the physical layout and the school's daily schedule to make it easy for teachers to move students in and out. Likewise, integrate the schoolyard into the life of the surrounding neighbourhood. Encourage before and after school programming as well as the use of school grounds on weekends, holidays, and summer recess.

4) To governmental bodies, consider the schoolyard when allocating educational funds and resources. Partner with private foundations, businesses, and community service organisations to share the burden. Build maintenance costs into your budgetary planning.

5) Lastly, remember why we are doing this. To provide our children with outdoor spaces in which to learn, recreate, and socialise. Group activities in the schoolyard will develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills that will benefit students as they grow, graduate, and become productive members of the community. From an environmental perspective, today's students will become tomorrow's caretakers of the planet. Lessons learned in developing and maintaining their school grounds will have a ripple effect throughout their lives as they grapple with how to live in harmony with each other and their world.

Thank you very much.